

SCOTLAND COMMITTEE OF THE UK NATIONAL COMMISSION FOR UNESCO, LITERACY SEMINAR: UNDERSTANDING LITERACY IN CHANGING ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL CIRCUMSTANCES

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INTERPRETING THE WORLD THROUGH THE WRITTEN WORD

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Prologue: Progress in literacy discourse

For many years, especially since the founding of UNESCO in 1945, scholars and educators have sought to define literacy, identify its uses, and examine its impact on society. Despite an overwhelming number of valuable contributions to the literacy discourse, there still seems room for further discussion of an exhaustive definition. There are demands for understanding literacy within the context of those who can read, but cannot write; and those who are concerned about the impact that low levels of reading and writing have upon society.

A definition of, and advocacy for literacy has been coordinated by UNESCO and the notion of literacy has been expanded beyond its simple definition as reading and writing into its types and varieties. At some stage in its quest, UNESCO had, indeed,

embarked upon what it called, 'mass education', which became transformed into 'fundamental education', in which literacy was considered essential to development. From 8 to 19 September 1965, UNESCO convened a World Conference of Ministers of Education, to reflect on the decline of literacy. As a result of the conference, a new literacy vocabulary: 'functional literacy' was conceived as literacy aimed at select economic groups and tailored to select economic groups rather than consisting simply of standard literacy aimed at illiterate people. In the meantime, the World Education Ministers Conference in Tehran recommended that the International Literacy Day be celebrated every year on September 8: the anniversary of the inauguration of the Conference, in order 'to mobilize public opinion and support for literacy throughout the world.' The recommendation was swiftly implemented by member nations, and the celebration was continued in 1966, while the Literacy Prize was added to it the following year. Scholars involved in the World Experimental Project began making further contributions within the field of functional literacy. Sunday Hezekiah Oluwanwo Tomori of Nigeria, for example, reported on his work with tobacco growers in Nigeria.

Arguments have also been advanced for the indispensability of literacy to development, seeking to identify its many different uses. To this end, scholars have worked hard and written extensively in defence of investment in literacy. For example, Oxenham, in and outside his work at the World Bank, has sought to provide sufficient evidence of literacy's benefit to economic productivity, citing the case where literacy had supported the process of the integration of the poorer population into the development process. Lekan Oyedeji has in a similar way made a contribution on the value of making an investment in literacy for development. UNESCO's International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP) endorsed these views on literacy for development, observing that, 'Education has been shown to have an impact on individual workforce outcomes such as a higher income, but the impact is greater than that.'

Literacy and formal schooling are linked with reduced fertility rates, improved health and sanitation practices, and an increased ability to access information and participate in various social and economic processes. Educated parents also tend to invest more in children's schooling, health/nutrition, and human capital measures important for future well-being. Ensuring women's access to education plays a key role in the transition from an investment in child quantity to an investment in child quality.'

Educators such as Alan Rogers, Jones Akinpelu, Juma Nyrenda, Thomas Fasokun, and Akpovire Oduaran have worked on the subject of differing types of literacy and their methods of teaching and promotion. Other scholars, such as Paul Fordham, Lalage Bown, and Heribert Hinzen have advocated literacy and its relevance to the attainment of the goals set by Education For All, including poverty reduction and gender equality. Others, such as Harbans Bhola, C.M.B. Brann, Gbolagade Adekanmbi, Stanley Mpofu, Rashid Aderinoye and Dan Wagner have explored the important subject of learner recruitment, enrolment, mobilization, performance, and retention; the language of literacy; and funding of literacy programmes. Also of note, are the recent initiatives of such scholars as Wolfgang Leumer, Norman Longworth, Mike Osborne and Thomas Fasokun on literacy and continuing learning in the cities and the role of lifelong learning.

The World before the written word

We will take much of the illustrations from Africa. This is partly because this writer is more familiar with the developments in the region. There is also what has been described as the irresistible attraction and fascination with Africa. As Simon Barnes, a highly respected journalist for the Times of the UK, in his special report on Thursday, 7 January 2010 has put it: "Africa is great. Africa is full of great people doing great things. Africa is a place of joy, of inspiration, of hope. To spend time in Africa is to change your understanding of the world, and to do so for the better. Every visitor to Africa, no matter how generous, gains more from Africa than he is capable of giving. Africa is not a basket case. Africa is not a place

without hope, without ambition, without plan...Africa is not remarkable only for its wounds, whether self-inflicted or inflicted by the colonial powers. Africa is more. Africa is greater than we can understand, and infinitely richer. Some things in Africa do inspire pity, horror and guilt, but there is far more to Africa than the shock responses of the people from richer nations. Africa is not – absolutely not – the continent of eternal loser”. The work of Africanists such as Roland Oliver has also validated the point that is being made by Barnes.

The story of Africa also vividly demonstrates what can be achieved in the field of development by partnership and collaboration across geographical, language, cultural, and religious boundaries and frontiers.

In appreciating the importance of the acquisition of literacy, it is perhaps useful to entertain some discussion of the circumstances of those to whom literacy was introduced—prior to its introduction. Harbans Bholia, Jakob Horn, Heribert Hinzen, Lekan Oyediji and Wolfgang Leumer, whose views I have steadfastly shared, have frequently described the nobility of illiterate peoples, and frowned at their depiction as ignorant. The prevailing notion that illiteracy is a disease is perhaps not the best word as it brings to mind infection and contagion as well as the more relevant disadvantage and suffering; and is therefore an unacceptable one. Every community uses language as a means of communication, and therefore the word is an almost universal human phenomenon. In Africa, there have been many fairly recent examples of fully functioning illiterate societies.

The world without the written word of course had its challenges, some of which we shall seek to discuss later in this presentation, but those societies were, at the time, largely unaware of those limitations. They simply lived in a world where all the words they needed were available. There were active economies involving marketing and the exchange of goods and services, dominated largely by women whose knowledge of the market economy remains proverbial. As chants and incantations, the word was used to invoke spirits, invite curses or blessings, and to alter the destiny of man. Tradition records that medicine specialists were invited to speak the word to the sky to stop the

rain falling during festive times. Religion played an effective role in regulating standards of behaviour, bringing justice to the people and coordinating the orderly governance of society. These pre-literate societies cherished the values of integrity, honesty, loyalty; and treacheries and betrayals were severely punished. With the aid of the talking drum, the age groups and the apprenticeship systems, the traditional society used the word to inculcate the values of diligence, honesty, hard work, dignity and dedication into the minds of the people. The peer groups became a source of encouragement and inspiration to live a life that was desirable and sensitive to the needs of the wider society. Non-formal courses were offered in agriculture, and there was a productive knowledge of the planting and harvesting seasons. The community benefited from weddings, festivities, and healthy family ties; there were instructions in traditional medicine, warfare and training for all necessary types of livelihood. The situations in pre-literate society confirm the view that there is certainly more to living than the acquisition of the written word and that the unwritten word is very powerful.

The world after the written word

Those who introduced Western literacy to Africa were keen to share the system, which they believed to have assisted their own societies to move forward. Christian missionaries have been at the forefront of literacy introduction in the indigenous languages which they already used. The aim was to promote reading of the Bible. The missionaries were eager to assist the new converts discover how to live a life of righteousness on earth, and find their way to heaven. The new teachers could not conceive of a world without the written word. They believed that every individual has the creative potential to make some contribution, which the absence of the written word would always prevent. They firmly believed in the power of the written word. As Olson once argued, 'speech makes us human and literacy makes us civilized.'

A few studies have sought to identify the origins of literacy and its earlier rudimentary uses. A leading historian of the early African missions, J.F. Ade Ajayi, explains that the literacy provided for early converts in Africa was limited to reading ability. Some studies have described those with a basic grasp of reading and writing skills as semi-literate.

And we may note that whilst it is possible to read without being able to write, it is inconceivable to have writing skills without the ability to read. This is the type of argument, among others advanced in the works of Alan Rogers.

To ensure the availability of reading materials, Ajayi Crowther, the first African Bishop ordained by the Church Missionary Society, had worked with colleagues at translating the Bible to the local language. Despite being incapable of writing, however, these new converts took pride in the new skill with which they could read the Bible and other simple texts, which encouraged them to learn more about the birth, life, and work of Christ. These were the simple messages that the likes of David Livingstone and other missionaries also took to parts of Africa. Members of external, religiously governed societies, therefore, considered literacy to be an important part of the modern development process, in instantiating a new social order.

The ability to read and write has remained a basic ingredient for education in any community. I recall that, as I was growing up, our elementary teacher frequently invited the class to copy onto their slates, the words he wrote on the chalkboard. Thus, literacy was introduced to us, first through recognition, and then reproduction of the written word, in accompaniment to our pronunciation of each word written down. Now I understand that the teacher was introducing us to the Roman alphabets with which we could later compose sentences. But this was only the beginning. Alan Rogers, the founding secretary-general of the Commonwealth Association for the Education and Training of Adults (CAETA), has spent time researching signposts in some

countries, for his fascinating study: *Real Literacy Materials*. The materials documented are composed, usually by adults, whose main incentive is to market their products and services, using a combination of symbols and letters to convey a message and capture the imagination.

Literacy has now been widely acknowledged as more than a mere gift, seen as if a special attitude is required for it that only a certain people possess. It is recognised that the vast majority of humans have an aptitude for literacy and as a powerful weapon: forcing open doors and furthering the acquisition of essential knowledge. It was indeed the foundation of modern civilisations, opening up and interpreting the world to everyone who has access to the written word. It was the instrument with which explorers opened up vast new horizons for other parts of the world.

In a literate society, the word itself acquires greater importance from having been transcribed, thus facilitating the exchange of information and ideas among more people and across greater distances. Indeed, all major civilizations have been tremendously assisted by the availability of the written word in the conveyance of thoughts, ideas, instructions, guidelines, demands, and messages. For example, ancient civilizations such as the Babylonian, Greek, and Roman empires arguably flourished by the power of the written word as much as by military power. We can also draw attention to the value of the written word in the life and works of the Old Testament prophets and their prophecies. We know that in the New Testament times, John, one of Jesus' disciples, who had been exiled to the remote island of Patmos, was instructed in a vision: 'write down in a book all that you see'. (Revelation 1: 11) All the major religions also have writing as an important component. Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam—all refer to sets of written literature on which the faith is built and disseminated. Followers are encouraged to open their eyes and

read, sometimes recite the written words and ‘behold the wondrous things out of the word’.

A transformation occurs as the word becomes written, read, and spoken. Opportunities to take on new challenges and become self-dependent are offered to the person inducted into literacy. He or she begins an exciting voyage of discovery into the hitherto unattainable secrets of human knowledge collated by writers. If knowledge is power, then the ability to read empowers: providing an ever expanding array of choices, which an ability to write enlarges further still. A new energy is released and a new competence developed. Such is the power of literacy, as confirmed by the findings of the University Village Association (UNIVA), a Nigerian NGO supported by the British Council, the International Foundation for Education and Self Help (IFESH), the Laubach Literacy International and the University of Ibadan, whose submission earned the running prize of the Literacy Research competition of the UNESCO Institute for Education in Hamburg which also published the submission. The programme found that learners in the more rural areas conceived of literacy as a liberating factor. For example, one learner, Mulikat Adedapo, expressed joy that he could now, without seeking assistance, write letters to, and receive them from his children, who lived far from the village. In his own words:

‘I open my heart in the letters and I write what nobody would know except my friends. When I receive confidential letters, nobody knows my secret except the persons in whom I confide. It is a great privilege for me to be able to read and write and it is a miracle—a new thing in my life because nobody can ever know my secret except me and my God.’

The indispensability of the written word for the modern world becomes even clearer as people explore the world of information for the acquisition of wider knowledge. Without literacy life can be severely limited as we have attempted to demonstrate in our earlier submission. It is clear that one

requires the information carefully assembled with the assistance of the written word to plan, articulate the vision and move forward. The demands for literacy have also increased with the emergence of an increasingly complex global world with its unprecedented growth in knowledge. There is also the attendant and all pervasive influence of the internet, surfing the net, sending text messages, sending email messages, and making online bookings and purchases which require an effective knowledge of literacy.

We must add that for many disadvantaged and minority groups, literacy opens invaluable doors to information that will enable them to find a voice. Vulnerable members of society: in particular, those whom poverty has prevented from receiving a proper education can often be ignorant of many of their constitutional rights. Without the ability to read about the political issues which affect their demographic more than any other, illiterate minorities will be significantly hindered in communicating their needs and more vulnerable to misrepresentation and manipulation. They are uncoordinated as an interest group, and dependent upon the goodwill of advocates, and teachers of literacy skills. As the struggles of every day life take priority, many cannot see the tangible returns from investing their time in attending literacy classes. Perhaps if they are strongly convinced of the benefits that literacy will bring to all areas of their lives, they will come to believe that it is worth the effort. It becomes imperative therefore to design appropriate strategy that will persuade the most impoverished that literacy is in their interest and how such a solution can be implemented.

In the case of asylum seekers and refugees, there is often not only the illiteracy issue, but also a language barrier with which to contend. We are of course aware of the class of immigrants and refugees such as the German Karl Marx (1818-1883), and the Hungarian Colonel George Lane (1915-2010) who could integrate into their new location because they were already

literate in English before their arrival in the United Kingdom. They also had friends in good standing that were able to support them on arrival in their new home of abode. The concern is with the vulnerable, those arriving in a strange country to escape persecution, torture, or death in their own countries. The lack of adequate resources for dealing ethically with them often leaves the fate of individuals in the hands of disinterested parties and poorly enforced government legislation. Many immigrants and immigrants entering the technologically and economically advanced countries come into contact, for the first time, with such things such as train and bus timetables, bank accounts, and the many bureaucratic conventions this country is so fond of. It is perhaps for these people that provision for the teaching of the written word is most urgently required, especially as the global environmental, economic, and political crises threaten to result in many more immigrants worldwide.

It has been suggested that for many, their native language, that of their adoptive country, and one other would stand them in good stead. Conrad Benedict Brann, a former staff member of UNESCO once described this trio of languages, in his Inaugural Lecture, as the Mother Tongue, Other Tongue and Further Tongue (Brann, 1980). This means that an African who decides to live in the United Kingdom ought not to forget his mother tongue, whilst learning English and would be best advised to have some working knowledge of another world language such as French, Spanish, Russian, Chinese or Arabic. Perhaps this idea would be attractive only for the immigrants who have fully settled down and for whom the knowledge of the third language provides a further opportunity for advancement. It seems clearly supererogatory for the average immigrant to cope with more immediate challenges of livelihood.

However learning rudiments of additional languages can prove rewarding a nourishing to tourists, especially in the economically and politically stable countries. For example,

whilst it may be true that Latin can be proclaimed a ‘dead’ language in most parts of the UK, it is by no means dead in many of its Churches, where it remains the language of religion. Thus, the Catholic Church at London’s Leicester Square: the Notre Dame de France carries the inscription, ‘Venite Adoremus’. Westminster Cathedral in London bears the original message, ‘In Omnibus Glorificetur Deus’ carved in Latin to celebrate the pilgrimage of Pope John Paul II to England on 28 May 1982. The translation in English was provided as ‘May God be glorified in all things’. It is interesting that even outside the Church, as in the London Victoria Embankment, there is an inscription and the message of hope; “Fidei Coticula Crux”-The Cross is the Touchstone of Faith. There is therefore no doubt that a working knowledge of the original language would have provided considerable joy to pilgrims who later visited the Cathedral.

And for the health sector

There can be no disputing the fact that literacy acquisition is a great advantage in the promotion of good health. It can generate an awareness of the basic needs for living, the supply of safe drinking water, sanitation, hygiene and an efficient and healthy communal life. The availability of the literacy classes and the establishment of literacy communities can also contribute to social cohesion. As some research has suggested, ‘relaxing with friends, celebrating marriages, birthdays, and other social activities tends to prolong the life of the people’. This is what good literacy classes offer. Laughter has similarly been linked to a longer life span and we have tons of laughter as adult learners begin to attempt learning writing the word and reading it.

It has been found that literacy also helps one to discover the principles and secrets of living well, how to pursue a healthy life style, and share the knowledge with others. People are brought hope and an encouragement from reading that all is by no means over because of an illness. Their health is also put in their own

hands as they are made aware of all available opportunities when making difficult decisions.

The University of Ibadan Literacy project in Nigeria, referenced earlier in this paper, also reports that literacy learners observed significant changes in their lifestyles. One of the learners, Mrs Idayatu Olaniran, of a remote village in Oyo State, Nigeria, observed that literacy had enhanced her status in her community and given her self confidence:

‘I now interact better in the society and I raise my head higher in the community. Literacy makes me conscious of a lot of things that I disregarded before. For instance, I now take note of the instructions in my drug packs and I take note of drug labels and other notices. Now I cannot misapply any drug. Literacy is like a lamp that is showing the way. It is like you are going to a town and you have the address, so you cannot miss your way.’

The literacy programmes introduced the learners to methods of preventing dehydration, depression, and the common illnesses frequently contributing to economic underperformance. Additional courses which the learners found attractive included Health and well being; Health is wealth, and Health and lifestyles. The idea was to encourage learners to explore into greater depths issues related to the courses. They were also encouraged to acquire, through reading, the additional knowledge necessary for the prevention and treatment of a wide range of diseases and illnesses, including the prevalent HIV & AIDS.

Literacy learning should be used for the promotion of health and well being. Perhaps we now have a good reason to recommend the establishment of a World Health Literacy Programme, similar to the World Functional Literacy Programme of the 60s. And it is good to know that UNESCO continues to have a sympathetic listening ear to new ideas such as is being canvassed for an effective health care delivery through literacy and adult learning.

The future of literacy

It is indisputable that tomorrow's world will be dominated and guided by the word. The disadvantages for anyone without knowledge of the written word will only increase, as will the word's assistance in helping people to understand the world around them. Partnership will continue to be required in literacy promotion. This therefore means that there will always be an element of learning to live and share together. Learners will always be grateful for the support of those who know. If one may again borrow from the story of the partnership recorded in the Bible, the modern Ethiopian eunuch who could read but did not understand what he read, would always require the support, encouragement and assistance of the Apostle Phillip who had to interpret the Scriptures to him. The partnership proved rewarding to both the eunuch and Phillip.

In keeping with modern development, there will always be a need to diversify the literacy programmes of the future. Thus, one would recommend that literacy accommodates programmes for civic education and politics: involving the reading of the Constitution, knowledge of political parties and their manifestos, how to vote and how to stand for election, vote counting, economic literacy, literacy for social justice and inclusion, legal literacy, and the protection of human rights. The preparation of materials and the method of facilitation must also be sensitive to the requirements of the excluded and new learners, especially the vulnerable population and the immigrants. It should also address the health needs of the people as a priority, so that they can do everything possible to help themselves before relying on already over-taxed healthcare systems.

Epilogue: African-Scottish connections

Two of the major outposts for the training of the earliest Nigerian educated elite were King's College, London and the universities of Scotland. Thus the first set of Nigerian medical students, William Broughton Davies and James Africanus Beale Horton, were trained in Scotland. Davies obtained his MD by examination from the University of St. Andrews in October 1858, and Horton by a thesis from Edinburgh University in 1859. It should therefore be a delight for Africans to visit Scotland and appreciate the investment in the education of the region of Africa. In an excellent chronicle of medical history, Adelola Adeloye observes that in the second half of the nineteenth century all except two of the foundation medical students in Nigeria, passed through Scottish medical schools, where they completed their professional medical training. He draws attention to the particular case of John Randle who was reported to have saved every penny he had, to finance his studies, which began in 1884 and were completed in 1888, graduating with an M.B., C.M., and the gold medal in material medica. Randle returned to Nigeria to become a heavy weight in the social and political world of his time. One could continue to cite several other cases of those who completed their theses and medical training with distinction in Scotland.

But let me quickly add that my enthusiasm to accept the invitation to share my thoughts is also informed by the noble role that Scotland has historically played in the development of Africa. Indeed, the history of Africa cannot be complete without mention of the role played by the people of Scotland in assisting its development through the introduction of the written word. Specifically, we can draw attention to the transformation which was brought to the people and the society through the reading, writing, and speaking of the word in the regions in which the missions operated. The missions also helped to bring health, restoration, and hope to the people, and addressed such perennial issues as loneliness, fear, despair, helplessness, anger,

hate, deceit, through the reading and study of the word of God. For example, Dr David Livingstone introduced the word of God to people in Southern Africa, especially South Africa, Botswana, Zambia, Zimbabwe and Malawi. His message was about Jesus Christ, whom the Bible describes as the Stone that lives forever, the “Living Stone”. It was again the Scottish explorer, Mungo Park, who led the historic expedition, which unravelled the mystery of the course of River Niger. We should also remember the work of the Presbyterian Mission in establishing Christianity, especially in Eastern Nigeria and introducing industrial education through the Hope Waddell Institute. Many products of the college contributed effectively to the Independence movement of Nigeria. Also, the young Mary Slessor has been credited with helping to stop the practice of killing twins at birth.

Through the Commonwealth Scholarships and Fellowships Commission, I was able to spend one year at King’s College, London, as a Commonwealth Academic Staff fellow, some thirty-five years ago. And today I have the privilege to be here at the University of Glasgow in Scotland to complete my educational pilgrimage and therefore experience a taste of the historic educational route. I must therefore express my profound appreciation to Professor Mike Osborne, Dr Alan Foster, and the entire Board of the Scottish Committee of the UK National Commission for UNESCO, and all those who had been involved in the planning for this conference, for this honour.

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